

Jerry D. Spencer,¹ M.D., J.D. (CDR, M.C., U.S.N.)

George Armstrong Custer and the Battle of the Little Bighorn: Homicide or Mass Suicide?

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ABSTRACT: On 25 June 1876, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer perished along with 224 men under his immediate command in a battle historically referred to as the Battle of the Little Bighorn. There is some evidence that this was not a battle at all, but a mass suicide. The theory of mass suicide could be substantiated by examination of the skeletal remains.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, Battle of the Little Bighorn, suicide, Last Word Society

For more than 100 years the Battle of the Little Bighorn has been a favorite subject of Western writers and historians. The battle was the last major confrontation between the Plains Indians and the army and marked the greatest defeat suffered by the U.S. government in the many years of the Indian Wars. The major fascination with the battle over the intervening years has continued to be the enigma of the complete destruction of a large cavalry unit led by Civil War hero George Armstrong Custer.

The Battle

The Battle of the Little Bighorn [1,2] evolved during a large-scale military operation organized to force an estimated 3000 Sioux and Cheyenne Indians back to a reservation. Troopers from three installations—Fort Fetterman in Wyoming Territory, Fort Ellis in Montana Territory, and Fort Abraham Lincoln in Dakota Territory—were detailed for the operation. General George Crook, leading troops from Fort Fetterman, first encountered the Indians on 17 June. The subsequent battle, historically referred to as the Battle of the Rosebud, ended in a stalemate, leaving Crook with diminished supplies and a number of wounded men. General Crook then decided to return to Fort Fetterman to regroup.

The other two groups, under the command of Colonel John Gibbon from Fort Ellis and General Alfred H. Terry from Fort Abraham Lincoln, had been ordered to operate jointly. Terry's group included the Seventh Cavalry Regiment, under the immediate command of Lt. Col. George Custer. After the forces were joined, a staff planning conference was held aboard a riverboat. By that time, the general location of the Indian village was suspected to be on the Little Bighorn River. General Terry, the overall commander of the combined operation, decided to send his more mobile cavalry southward, to a position below the Indian

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¹Chairman, Department of Forensic Sciences, Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, Washington, DC.

encampment. Terry and Gibbon would lead the infantry down the Bighorn River, and then down the Little Bighorn River. From the overall plan it was expected that on 27 June the cavalry would be in position to the south and the infantry to the north of the Indian encampment. It was envisioned that the Indians would be trapped between these two forces.

Lt. Col. Custer started south, following Rosebud Creek, on 22 June with a command of 650 troopers. On the third day he encountered a large Indian trail leading to the west. Instead of continuing south, he turned his force to the west, following the Indian trail. On the morning of 25 June his scouts identified the location of the Indian village, then approximately 24 km (15 miles) further west. Shortly thereafter, mounted Indians were seen. It was evident that these Indians had also observed the cavalry troopers. Custer became concerned that the mounted Indians would warn the village and that all of the Indians would get away. He decided to attack the village immediately. The events prior to 25 June are illustrated in Fig. 1.

Custer's decision to attack the village precipitated the Battle of the Little Bighorn, which was actually three battles occurring over a two-day period (25–26 June). Following his decision to attack immediately, Custer detached a battalion of approximately 120 troopers under Captain Frederick W. Benteen to determine if other villages were located to the south. A short time later, Custer detached a second battalion, under Major Marcus A. Reno, instructing him to attack the south end of the village. Reno crossed the river with 120 troopers but was confronted by hundreds of Indians as he approached the village. He was forced to retreat and lost about one fourth of his troopers in recrossing the river and scrambling up an adjacent hill. This abortive attack on the south end of the village was the first battle of the Little Bighorn. Soon after arriving on the hill, the remnants of Reno's battalion were joined by Benteen's battalion. Captain Benteen had scoured the area to the south without encountering any Indians.

The second battle took place some 6 km (4 miles) to the north of the hill, where Benteen's battalion had joined Reno's battalion. In this second battle, Custer died with the 224 men under his command. There were no cavalry survivors.

The third battle of the Battle of the Little Bighorn commenced late in the afternoon when

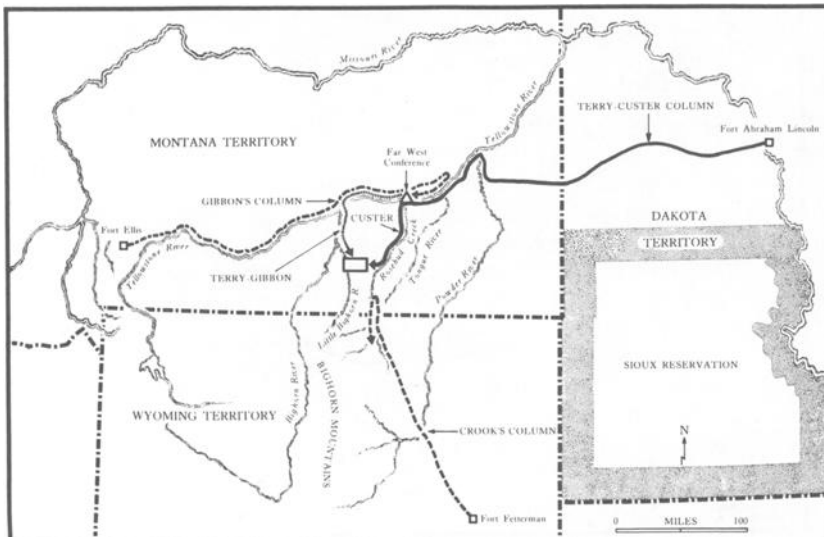


FIG. 1—Map (adapted by permission) illustrating the three U.S. Army groups in June 1876 (AFIP Negative 82-11786-1). Credit: The OLD WEST/The Soldiers, Maps by Rafael Palacios, Time-Life Books Inc. Publishers, © 1973 Time Inc.

the Reno-Benteen group was attacked by the Indians. The troopers successfully defended themselves on the 25th and 26th of June. The Indians finally withdrew, evacuating their village on the 27th after learning of the approach of additional troopers from the north (under Terry and Gibbon). Figure 2 identifies the three battles, occurring 25–26 June.

The Historical Version

Scouts from General Terry's command found Custer's body and those of most of his men on a hill, some distance from the river. Custer's body was found within a cluster of about 50 others, near the top of the hill. Scattered bodies were found on both sides of the hill throughout its length, however. There was also a group of approximately 20 bodies located down the hill, about 0.4 km (1/4 mile) away from the point where Lt. Col. Custer was found. Most of the bodies were scalped and mutilated, although the body of Custer was neither scalped nor mutilated. Approximately 70 dead cavalry horses were found on the crest of the hill. They had apparently been shot to form a defensive position. Only one dead Indian pony was found on the entire Custer battlefield.

The usually accepted historical version of the battle is that Custer and his men were surrounded by hundreds to thousands of Indians. Though the number of Indian combatants is unknown, there have been estimates that from 1500 to 8000 warriors may have been involved in the Custer battle. The general historical view is that Custer's men were overwhelmed by the large number of Indians in a mass charge.

There are a number of problems with the historical version of the Custer defeat. If the evidence of a single dead Indian pony on the battlefield is considered, it is very unlikely that the Indians engaged in a single mass charge. This view is supported by the Indian tactics against the Reno-Benteen group. In that two-day battle, approximately 350 troopers successfully defended themselves. At no time did the Indians conduct a mass charge. The battle was mainly a sniping action, with the Indians firing from concealed positions.

Comparison of the number of cavalry troopers killed in action with the number of the Indian dead presents another problem for the historical version. According to available rec-

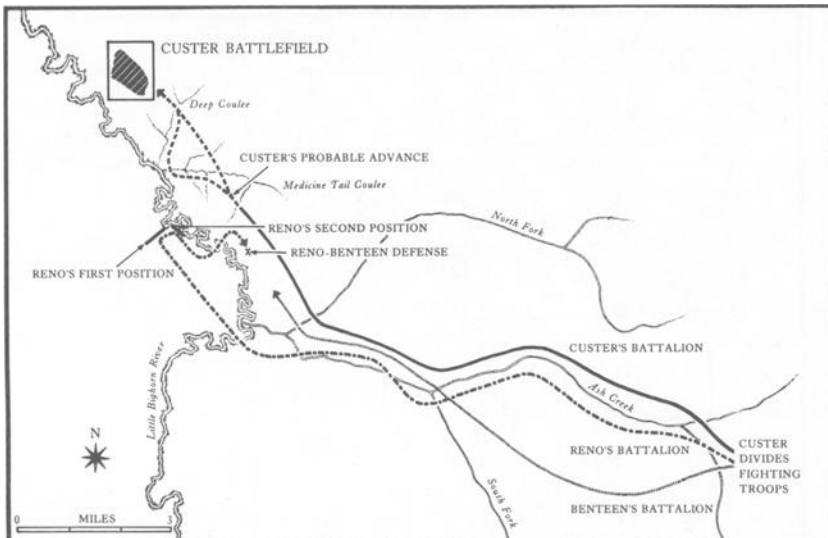


FIG. 2.—Map (adapted by permission) illustrating movements of Lt. Col. Custer and his battalions on 25 June 1876 (AFIP Negative 82-11786-2). Credit: The OLD WEST/The Soldiers, Maps by Rafael Palacios, Time-Life Books Inc. Publishers, © 1973 Time Inc.

ords, approximately 270 troopers died during the three battles. In contrast, only 41 dead Indians were found in the abandoned village. They were found on scaffolds and in trees, in accordance with the burial practice of the Indian participants of the battle. More Indians may have died later from wounds. The army estimated, however, that fewer than 100 Indians had been killed during the entire Battle of the Little Bighorn. The question that remains is why such a disproportionate number of cavalry troopers were killed in action.

The Suicide Theory of Dr. Marquis

Because there were no cavalry survivors in the Custer battle (the second battle), there has been endless speculation about all aspects of that battle. One of the more interesting theories proposed to account for the death of Custer and his men was that they committed suicide en masse after they were surrounded by the Indians. This theory was advanced by Thomas B. Marquis, a physician assigned to the Cheyenne Indian Reservation during the late teens and early 1920s. In the process of ministering to the health needs of the Indians, Dr. Marquis interviewed a number of the survivors of the Custer battle and, from these Indian accounts, developed his theory. His book, *Keep the Last Bullet for Yourself*, was rejected by several publishers. The title of the book came from a saying attributed to soldiers fighting the Indians, "Whatever happens, don't let the Indians take you alive; they will torture you, so keep the last bullet for yourself." Dr. Marquis died in 1935. His book was finally published in 1976, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the battle.

According to Dr. Marquis, nothing happened in the battle for approximately 1-½ h. Custer and his men were completely surrounded by the Indians but had a good defensive position on the hill. The Indians had dismounted and were hiding in gullies and draws. There was periodic shooting, but neither side could see the other very well. Then a group of approximately 20 troopers mounted their horses and galloped down the hill in an apparent effort to escape. They were quickly cut off by a combination of the Indians and deep gullies. A number of Indians and soldiers died in this brief fight. Then, much to the surprise of the Indians, a number of soldiers in this group began shooting themselves. This action was in full view of the approximately 200 troopers remaining on the hill. A short while later, the Indians heard considerable shooting on the hill, then nothing. Cautiously going up the hill, they found six or seven troopers still alive. They were quickly killed, and that was the end of the battle.

In his book, Dr. Marquis speculated as to the various reasons the mass suicide of Custer's men had not become public knowledge. One reason, he surmised, might have been a communications problem with the Indians, who, in interviews might spend several hours describing an event that had lasted for only a few minutes. Frequently, reporters would become exasperated with an interview and terminate it. He felt that another reason might have been the Indians' fear of retribution—worry about possible punishment for not telling the story the way (they thought) the army or reporters wanted to hear it. Finally, according to Dr. Marquis, many of the Indians really did not understand what had happened. To them, it appeared that all of the troopers suddenly died. They regarded the battle as something of a "miracle."

Substantiation of the Suicide Theory

The bodies of Custer and his men were hastily buried after their discovery. Most of the bodies had been mutilated by the Indians and were decomposing after having lain in the hot sun for two days. The majority of the bodies were not identified and were simply placed in shallow graves. A year later, in 1877, a burial detail returned to the battle site. Many of the bodies were recovered and placed in a mass grave on top of the hill. Lt. Col. Custer's body and nine others were removed and buried elsewhere. Additional skeletons have been recovered over the intervening years. The skeletons had apparently been overlooked by the burial

detail of 1877. These skeletons have been reburied in the national cemetery at the Custer Battlefield National Monument.²

With the techniques of modern forensic science, it would be possible to substantiate the suicide theory of Dr. Marquis if the skeletons could be examined. Most individuals who commit suicide with a firearm shoot themselves in the head, with the muzzle of the weapon in contact or loose contact with the head. Besides the bullet, a large quantity of powder residue is driven into the scalp tissues and into the skull. The powder residue is actually driven into the skull, where it will remain indefinitely.

Sophisticated techniques such as scanning electron microscopy with X-ray diffraction analysis could be used to evaluate the skulls for powder residue. Because of the type of gun-



FIG. 3—Pig after he was shot in the forehead (loose contact range) with a black powder .44-caliber revolver (AFIP Negative 82-11786-3).

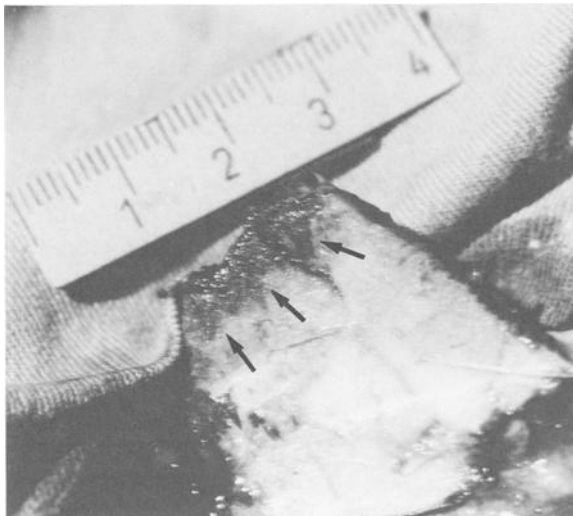


FIG. 4—Closeup photograph of a fragment of skull of the pig shot with the black powder handgun. The periosteum has been partially stripped away. The arrows point to the powder residue driven into the bone (AFIP Negative 82-11786-4).

²The author does not advocate exhuming any of the skeletons.

powder used in 1876, however, these techniques would be unnecessary. At that time "black powder," a mixture of charcoal, sulfur, and potassium nitrate, was used as the propellant in both rifle and handgun bullets, rather than the modern "smokeless" powder, or nitrocellulose. Black powder on ignition produces very large quantities of powder residue, much more than smokeless powder.

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the amount of powder residue discharged from a black powder handgun. The pistol utilized was a replica of an 1873 Remington, caliber .44. A dead pig, (he was killed while anesthetized during another experimental study) was shot in the head with the pistol held in loose contact. Figure 3 demonstrates the scalp of the pig after he was shot. A large quantity of soot was deposited on the scalp. Severe fractures of the skull were caused by the .44-caliber bullet. A closeup view (Fig. 4) of the skull shows a fragment of bone at the entrance wound with abundant powder residue driven into the bone. The powder residue could not be wiped off.

It is likely that powder residue would be retained in the skull bones of the skeletons if any of Custer's men committed suicide by shooting themselves in the head. Only simple visual examination of the skulls would be necessary to determine the presence or absence of the powder residue. If powder residue was found adjacent to an entrance wound defect in a significant number of skulls, this finding would tend to substantiate the mass suicide theory.

Conclusion

Interest in the Battle of the Little Bighorn has remained high even though 106 years have passed since the battle. There have been numerous theories to account for the events that occurred at the Custer battle on 25 June 1876. One of the theories, that of a mass suicide, was proposed by a physician who interviewed a number of the Indian survivors of the battle. The suicide theory could be substantiated (or disproven) if the skeletons were available for examination. Since the skeletons are not accessible, however, exactly what occurred that day will likely remain unknown.

References

- [1] Marquis, T. B., *Keep the Last Bullet for Yourself*, Reference Publications, Inc., New York, NY, 1976.
- [2] Time-Life Books, *The Soldiers*, Time-Life Books, Inc., Alexandria, VA, 1973.

Address requests for reprints and additional information to
Jerry D. Spencer, CDR., M.C., U.S.N.
Department of Forensic Sciences
Armed Forces Institute of Pathology
Washington, DC 20306